

tZ
232

M8S8

UC-NRLF



B 3 973 564



LIBRARY
SCHOOL

The Influence of
William Morris
and
The Kelmscott Press

As shown by an Exhibition of Books from the
Later English Presses, at The John Carter
Brown Library in December, 1911

by

MARGARET BINGHAM STILLWELL

PROVIDENCE
RHODE ISLAND
1912

LIBRARY
SCHOOL

*Reprinted, with a few changes, from
the Brown Alumni Monthly
for March, 1912*

THE BROWN ALUMNI MONTHLY
MARCH 1912
PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS OF E. A. JOHNSON & CO.
PROVIDENCE, R. I.

*Press of E. A. Johnson & Co.
Providence, R. I.*

The Kelmscott Press and its Inspiration

DURING the winter of 1911, as one of the extension courses at Brown University, Mr. H. L. Koopman of the John Hay Library conducted a class in "Bibliography." Hieroglyphic languages; early alphabets; the manuscripts of Classical and Mediæval times; the Invention of Printing; the various stages through which the printer's art has passed; and the so-called "Revival of Printing" of to-day, have each been touched upon in a series of lectures making for a brief survey of the history of book-making.

In connection with the lectures such books illustrating these subjects as are in the John Hay Library were put on exhibition in the Harris Room, where the class met each week. Early in December Mr. William E. Foster of the Providence Public Library arranged in the exhibition cases of that library books from the St. Bride Collection of Print-

ing which dealt with the topic then under discussion. Several works published in connection with the Gutenberg Festival in 1900 were shown. The majority of the books displayed, however, illustrated the controversy over the inventor of printing—Gutenberg of Mainz versus Coster of Haarlem—which, revived by Germany's Gutenberg Celebration in 1840, has raged intermittently during the last forty years or more, a controversy which Mr. William Blades, in his summary of the dispute, printed at London in 1887, "On the Present Aspect of the Question—Who Was the Inventor of Printing," aptly terms "acute warfare."

On December 19 the class visited the Annmary Brown Memorial, which is located not far from the University campus. In this building, which was erected in 1907 by General Rush C. Hawkins of New York as a memorial to his wife, there is a notable collection of books exemplifying the beginning of printing in the various countries of Europe.

General Hawkins' first fifteenth century book was acquired in 1855. His

efforts to find out something about the history of this book and its printer resulted in a continually growing interest in early printing. This took the form of a resolve "to obtain, if possible, a copy of the first book issued from each of the first presses, and failing in that, to obtain specimens from them, even though not of the first issue." The collection now contains specimens of the work of the first printers in every important European city, and in many of the lesser towns as well. These books are on permanent exhibition and the building, which also contains a collection of paintings by early and later masters, is open to the public each week on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Strangers visiting the city can usually arrange to visit the building on other days by making application in advance. Mr. Pollard of the British Museum, in his introduction to the Catalogue of the books in the Annmary Brown Memorial, says: "This (General Hawkins' main collection) consists of some four hundred and fifty incunabula, all shown open, so that the nature and quality of

the printing can be fully seen. Thus displayed they offer to the visitor as he walks around the four walls of a single room a better idea of the spread of printing throughout Europe between the years 1460 and 1500 than, to the best of my knowledge, can be obtained with equal ease in any other museum or exhibition in the world."

As a supplement to the early printed books studied by Mr. Koopman's class at the Annmary Brown Memorial, and the books from the St. Bride Collection on view at the Public Library, an exhibition was arranged in the John Carter Brown Library to cover still another and a later period in the history of printing. This exhibition consisted, for the most part, of specimens of printing from various English and American presses established during the last quarter century—the Kelmscott, the Vale, the Essex House and the Doves Presses representing England; and the work of D. B. Updike and Bruce Rogers, America. As none of these books come within the special field of the John Carter Brown Library, the exhibition was largely a loan. A few of the books belonged to

the late John Nicholas Brown and are now a part of the library; others were loaned by Mr. Winship, the librarian. Two books from the Kelmscott Press and specimen pages of the Kelmscott "Chaucer" formed the centre of interest in the exhibition. The first of these, "The Life of Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal Archbishop of York, written by George Cavendish" and printed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press in 1893, was presented by the editor, Mr. F. S. Ellis, to Mr. John Nicholas Brown; the other "A Note by William Morris on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press" issued March 4, 1898, was the last book printed at the Press, after the death of Mr. Morris.

Chronologically, the Kelmscott Press began the period frequently spoken of as that of "The Revival of Printing." Whether or not this "Revival" would have come about had the Kelmscott Press never existed, or had William Morris never lived, is an open question. Be that as it may, William Morris may well be called the "apostle" of his time—an era of which John Ruskin was perhaps the prophet.

William Morris, first of all, was a Mediævalist. For him the nineteenth century was non-existent or, at the most, a horrible nightmare. Three centuries were dropped from his mental vision. Blind to its evils and discomforts, seeing its unquestioned beauty in a rosy haze—Morris would have us live the life of the Middle Ages. Modern forms of architecture and of dress were an abomination; modern mechanical inventions, the labor-saving devices, manufacturing plants, were to him infernal machines. Modern “so-called civilization” was all wrong. We must begin afresh. And to do this we must hark back to the fifteenth century.

In his “News from Nowhere” Morris shows us his ideal world, where work is done with the hands for the love of the work itself; where all workmen are artists, and all artists, workmen; where there are no factories and no chimneys; where beautiful buildings are not “restored” and money is of no value. He sings of out-of-door life, of picturesque towns, and kindly, but albeit most neighborly, neighbors, and above all of joy in work and of joy in life.

This theory of Morris's was not the passing fancy of an "Idle Singer of an Empty Day," but a conviction consistently carried out in his own life. He allied himself with the cause of Socialism in the hope of bringing about conditions in which art could live. In his designs, whether for tapestries or wall-paper, stained glass or furniture, Morris turned always to the Mediæval for his motive. In poetry and romance, his theme was always some myth or tradition coming down through the ages. And so in printing, he turned again to the past.

As a book collector, Morris rode two hobbies—the work of the early printers and illuminated manuscripts. For years Morris had collected books from the early presses, his interest being mainly in the woodcuts. With the development of his scheme for starting a press of his own and the subsequent founding of the Kelmscott Press in January, 1891, these books took on a new meaning to him. From that time he sought to gather specimens of beautiful printing. These he studied, as he did his illuminated manuscripts, not that he might

copy, but that his work might reproduce the Spirit of the Mediæval.

In his "Note on his Aims in founding the Kelmscott Press," Morris said, "I have always been a great admirer of the caligraphy of the Middle Ages and of the earlier printing which took its place. As to the fifteenth century books, I had noticed that they were always beautiful by force of the mere typography, even without the added ornament, with which many of them are so lavishly supplied. And it was the essence of my undertaking to produce books which it would be a pleasure to look upon as pieces of printing and arrangement of type. Looking at my adventure from this point of view then, I found I had to consider chiefly the following things: the paper, the form of the type, the relative spacing of the letters, the words, and the lines; and, lastly, the position of the printed matter on the page. It was only natural that I, a decorator by profession, should attempt to ornament my books suitably. About this matter, I will only say that I have always tried to keep in mind the necessity for making my decoration a part of the page of type."

With characteristic abhorrence of the machine-made, Morris studied the methods of paper-making in the Middle Ages. He set up his vats and with white linen rags only, untouched by chemicals, he learned to make the paper on which his Kelmscott books, vellum excepted, were printed. With the knowledge of Mediæval script—which knowledge he held in common with the early printers, but with the advantage that he also had at hand specimens of the type which they themselves had produced—Morris designed three types: the “Golden,” the “Troy,” and the “Chaucer,” in which the influence of the Roman face employed by Jensen and the Gothic characters of Schœffer may be traced. To the Mediæval craftsman ornament was more or less incidental. To Morris, the ornament must be in harmony with the type; it must form an integral part of the page; in appearance, the two pages of an open book must be so related as to form a unit, or—to use Morris’s own term—they must be “architectural.” Like the early printers’, Morris’s first book attained a full-grown perfection. But his masterpiece was yet to be. In

June, 1896, only four months before he died, the magnificent Kelmscott "Chaucer" was completed.

The standard which the early printers had to attain in order to justify the product of their craft was of the very highest. Although unhampered by modern commercial conditions, the element of competition was not lacking in their work. The rivalry between the scribes and illuminators and the early printers resulted in the monumental products from the early presses. When the printed pages permanently took the place of the written and the work of the scribes was over, this competitive standard was removed. The increasing demand for printed books led to the practice of economies in time and in material, with the result that the art of printing, from that time on, has undergone a continuous process of degeneration. Not until nearly the end of the nineteenth century did the spirit of regeneration begin to manifest itself.

About 1890, Mr. Charles Ricketts and Mr. C. H. Shannon began issuing books decorated with wood-cut drawings, thus in a measure foreshadowing the revival

of the older ideals of printing. William Morris, with keener insight, saw the impossibility of making beautiful books with modern appliances and, with characteristic thoroughness, struck at the root of the matter in the study of paper, type, ink and "set-up." His example was not without its effect. In 1896, the first book in the Vale Type designed by Mr. Ricketts was printed. Like Morris, Mr. Ricketts took for his model the work of the early Venetian printers, but with the fundamental difference of conception that, whereas Morris, like the early printers themselves, approached printing through the study of the manuscript, Mr. Ricketts "abandoned the old tradition and conceived his forms as cut in metal." By 1904, the year in which the Vale Press was brought to a close, Mr. Ricketts had designed three types, "The Vale," "The Avon" and "The King's." In his "Bibliography of the Books issued by Hacon & Ricketts," the last book from their press, Mr. Ricketts writes: "The novelty of a book made during the recent revival lies in the fact that it shows design in each portion of it,

from type to paper, and from 'build' to decoration. Therein lies the difference between a book so understood and any other modern book printed before 1891; therein lies their affinity with the grand volumes of the Italian and German presses. A Kelmscott book, and, if I may say so, a Vale book, is a living and corporate whole, the quality of beauty therein is all-pervading; it is not decorated as a modern house is decorated by the upholsterer and the picture dealer; it is conceived harmoniously and made beautifully like any other genuine work of art. Unity, harmony, such are the essentials of fine book building."

The Guild of Handicraft at Hammer-smith, London, fearing that any attempt to establish another press would seem almost "an impertinence," did not take up the craft of printing while the Kelmscott Press was in existence. With Morris's death, the situation changed. Mr. C. R. Ashbee of Essex House, the headquarters of the Guild, immediately opened negotiations with the trustees of Morris's estate and succeeded in purchasing all the plant with the exception of the type and blocks—these being de-

posited by the trustees in the British Museum. He also was fortunate in securing the services of various men who had worked with Morris at the Kelmscott Press and who brought with them to the newly established Essex House Press some of the tradition and ideals which Morris had tried to instil into them. A little later, Mr. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, sometime binder of Kelmscott books, associated with one of Morris's most intimate friends, Mr. Emery Walker, in 1900 founded the Doves Press "to attack the problem of pure Typography, as presented by ordinary books in the various forms of prose, verse and dialogue, and keeping always in view the principle laid down in the Book Beautiful, that 'The whole duty of Typography is to communicate to the imagination, without loss by the way, the thought or image intended to be conveyed by the author.'"

In America, Morris has had a host of followers. Two, Daniel Berkeley Updike of the Merrymount Press and Bruce Rogers at the Riverside, caught the inspiration without losing its meaning through striving to imitate peculiari-

ties. Each has won a reputation which is based upon work done quite as well as anything produced on the other side of the Atlantic.

Thus the seed sown by William Morris developed—not by imitation of Kelmscott books, but by an attempt on the part of each of these presses to reproduce the spirit of the master printers of the Middle Ages. In 1894, in an address on Art and Labor, Morris said, "The new birth of art will be brought about noiselessly, gradually and without violent change." Ten years later, Mr. Ricketts in summing up the regeneration of the craft of printing, wrote, "It is now almost unnecessary to say that the finer conditions of book building were realized for the first time in modern printing by William Morris in the Kelmscott Press."

-2253

32

8

ARY

